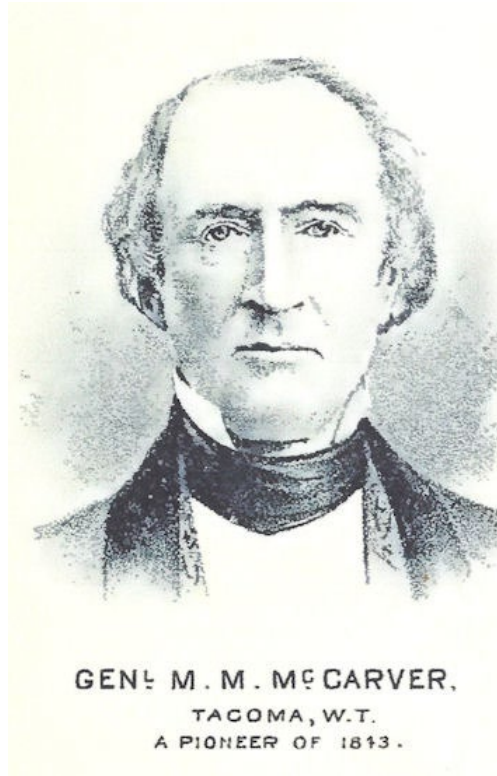


General Morton Mathew McCarver

Pioneer of 1843

oregonpioneers.com/ortrail.htm



GEN. MORTON MATHEW McCARVER

THE FOUNDER OF BURLINGTON, IOWA, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA AND TACOMA, WASHINGTON. — General McCarver was born near Lexington, Kentucky, January 14, 1807. Of an independent, roving spirit, determination, courage and enterprise that knew no bounds, he quit his home at the age of eighteen years and went to Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, and not finding anything congenial to his tastes returned and settled in 1830 at Galena, Illinois, where he was married to a Miss Mary Ann Jennings. He served in the Black Hawk war, and after the surrender of the great chief of the Sacs and Foxes, and as soon as the treaty between Black

Hawk and the United States had been drafted in 1833 (by the terms of which the valuable territory now the State of Iowa was to be ceded to the United States), and before the treaty was signed, he left his home in Illinois in view of locating a city which would one day become one of the great commercial centers of the West, towards which the tide of emigration was rapidly setting.

McCarver, then twenty-six years of age, journeyed down the Mississippi to a point then known as the Flint Hills; and in the evening, before crossing from the Illinois shore, he found shelter beneath the hospitable roof of a pioneer settler named George Buchanan, whose wife, during the night, gave birth to a son, who, before McCarver departed, was christened George Buchanan, after his happy father. Early the next morning McCarver crossed the Mississippi, and before noon had located at the top of the Flint Hills, and, had proceeded to erect a log cabin and found a home. But the Black Hawk treaty had not yet been ratified, and the Indians complained to the government that the Whites were encroaching upon their lands. Accordingly the Secretary of War ordered that all trespassers be summarily removed. Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, then stationed at Fort Snelling, was ordered with his command to evict the squatters, and at once proceeded down the river to order the Whites out of the forbidden territory. His soldiers, without the orders of the commanding officer, set fire to McCarver's cabin and burned it to the ground; and McCarver was forced to leave his new home, but only for a short time.

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died in 1845. He participated in the Cayuse war in 1847, and in 1848 was married to Mrs. Julia A. Buckalew, who still survives him.

About that time the news came of the discovery of gold in California; and in May, 1848, together with Mr. D. B. Hannah, he started overland for the new El Dorado, arriving at the Feather river in August. There General Sutter had laid out a town, the location of which did not suit McCarver, who decided on a location upon the present site of Sacramento City. Having formed a partnership with his former associate, Governor Burnett, he negotiated for the purchase of the site; but Governor Burnett bought the land on his own account; and General McCarver turned his attention to other enterprises. He formed a partnership with D. B. Hannah, and embarked in the real-estate and general merchandise business, building their house with their own hands. In 1849 Hannah bought the General out; and the latter was elected a member of the Monterey state convention, which framed the original constitution of California, and under which it was admitted as a state.

In December, 1849, Hannah returned to Oregon, bringing with him Mrs. McCarver, who had followed her husband to California. In order to show the difficulties of traveling at that day, let us follow them on their journey. They left San Francisco on the bark *John W. Decatur*, bound for the Hudson's Bay Company's station at what is now Victoria. Upon arriving off the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the wind failing, the bark was obliged to stand off to sea until the next day, when getting a fair wind she stood in and took a squall at the entrance of the strait which carried away her rudder, made a hole in her stern, and stove in her timberheads. After duffing about in a rough sea for twenty-four hours, some control of the vessel was regained by cutting away the mizzenmast. An entrance was finally effected; and, having got inside, she was forced to let go anchor and wait for the flood tide, when she drifted up the strait, anchoring in the night and on ebb tide. The second night inside, an alarm of "Indians" was given; and everyone was ordered on deck armed. Upon their approach within hailing distance, the supposed savages proved to be Captain Scarbrough, a pilot from the Hudson's Bay Company's station, who, sighting the vessel in distress, had engaged a crew of Indians and come to its relief. He was warmly welcomed by the storm-tossed people aboard the bark. They arrived at the Hudson's Bay Company's station after a passage of thirteen days; and thence they traveled three days by canoe to the Nisqually river, thence two days horseback to the Cowlitz river, and thence by canoe down the Cowlitz and up the Columbia, four days to Oregon City, arriving January 1, 1850, having been twenty-seven days on the passage.

General McCarver, having prospered in California, returned in 1851 by sailing vessel, bringing with him the hull and machinery for a steamboat, which he put together upon his arrival, this being the first steamboat on the Columbia river. He afterwards built another above the falls of the Willamette, and ran her from Canemah to Corvallis. All this time

he was running a nursery and orchard in Oregon City, and took the first premium for his fruits exhibited in California; and so scarce was fruit at that time that he once received the sum of eighteen dollars per bushel for apples.

After the Indian war of 1855-56, General McCarver went to Washington City to secure the payment of the claims of himself and a number of his neighbors for services and supplies; but the General was defeated through the misrepresentations of General Wool. Some of the claims remain unpaid to this day. He returned and located in Portland in 1858; and in 1862, upon the outbreak of the Idaho gold excitement, he went to The Dalles and established a general merchandise store. He afterwards went to Auburn and Idaho City, where he remained until 1864, during which time he had accumulated quite a fortune. He then went to New York, where he was the first man to engage in selling quartz mines on the market. During his absence in New York, his buildings and other property in Idaho City were burned and his business destroyed.

He returned to Portland in 1866 with but little* of his fortune remaining, and formed a partnership with L. M. Starr, President, and Jas. Steele, Cashier, of the First National Bank of Portland, and engaged in buying up war claims. He succeeded in making enough out of that to enable him to embark upon an enterprise which had occupied his attention,—the location of a town at a point upon Puget Sound which would be so favorably situated as to eventually become the western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad, an enterprise which at that time was beginning to loom up as a future trans-continental highway. In 1868, being then sixty-one years of age, General McCarver, having formed a partnership on equal shares with Messrs. Starr and Steele, mounted his horse and left Portland with the purpose of locating at Commencement Bay the town that after a careful study of its geographical position he had decided upon as having the best harbor facilities, and being so located as to make its connections with the interior easily accessible by railroad. This location he thought would eventually commend itself to the managers of the great railroad line as the best site for the western terminus of their road.

General McCarver proceeded to Olympia, where further examination of the maps in the surveyor-general's office and the land-office strengthened his determination to locate at the site of Old Tacoma; and he proceeded at once to that point, stopping over the night previous to his arrival at Commencement Bay at the house of a farmer a few miles from the present location of the city of Tacoma. Thirty-five years before, upon the night before General McCarver crossed the Mississippi river to locate the site of the present city of Burlington, he stopped for the night at the house of George Buchanan. During the night, as hereinbefore stated, a son was born, who was christened George Buchanan. The night before General McCarver reached the site of the future city of Tacoma, which he was journeying to found, he stopped over night with that identical George Buchanan, who was born thirty-five years before on the banks of the Mississippi river opposite

the site of Burlington. That night, as General McCarver tarried on his journey to Tacoma, a boy was born, who was named after his father, George Buchanan.

That remarkable incident, recalling recollections of the bright fortunes which had attended his memorable journey in 1833, had much to do with inspiring General McCarver with hopes that it was prophetic of as grand a success as his former enterprise had been, and when before noon he had climbed to the top of the bluff, and stood gazing upon the placid waters of the Sound, he might have said that he saw a forest of spars and miles of docks and railroads without having been guilty of any inexcusable flight of fancy. At that time there were only two settlers at Commencement Bay,—a man by the name of Galliher, who was running the old sawmill at the mouth of the creek of that name, and Mr. Job Carr, who some five years previous came from Iowa with the idea of settling at the point which would one day become the terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Carr, upon arriving at Olympia, had been told that that city was eventually to be the terminus; but he thought differently. Being out of funds he went to work at Olympia; but after a few months, having saved enough to enable him to explore the surrounding country, he started for Seattle, the location of which not suiting his ideas he returned to Olympia, procured a canoe and commenced exploring the sound to find a harbor suited for the future port of commerce.

Following the coast, he came to Commencement Bay, and being pleased with its harbor facilities landed and explored the country and shores of Tacoma, it being to his mind the best location for a large city, owing to the easy approaches by land and water, besides having plenty of fresh water near enough to be available for city needs. The land at that time being unsurveyed by the government, he located a squatter's claim, and two years later succeeded in getting the land surveyed by the government, paying two-thirds of the expense himself in order to get it done, after which he filed a pre-emption claim a little more than a year previous to the time when General McCarver arrived. The General immediately negotiated with Carr for all but five acres of his claim. After concluding this bargain with Carr, the General located a claim in his own name, and shortly afterwards left for Portland, having selected as a name for the proposed town, Commencement City.

Upon his arrival in Portland he stopped over night at the residence of his son-in-law, C. P. Ferry. Speaking of the proposed name for the town, Mr. Ferry raised the objection that it was too long, and suggested Tacoma. The following day, at a meeting held at the First National Bank of Portland, several names were discussed; and eventually, at a meeting held at the Tacoma mill, Mr. Atkinson proposed Sitwill, the name of the chief of the Puyallup Indians at that time; but Tacoma was finally adopted. A short time afterwards the General moved his family, consisting of a wife and three children, to Tacoma; and they took possession of a log cabin which the General had erected in what was afterwards known as Old Woman's gulch,

opposite the coal bunkers. A few weeks later, C. P. Ferry came to Commencement Bay to visit the General. There being but two routes from Portland to Tacoma, one by trail and the other by water, Mr. Ferry came by water *via* Victoria, as being the more direct and comfortable. Fare to Victoria, thirty-six dollars; from Victoria to Vashon Island, nine dollars; thence to Tacoma, about three miles out of the regular route to Olympia, nine dollars.

Upon arriving off Tacoma, the shores being heavily timbered to the water's edge, some difficulty was experienced in finding the city, which consisted of two cabins, Carr's and General McCarver's; but Mr. Carr set fire to a stump, and fired his rifle, whereupon the steamer stopped and sent a boat ashore with Mr. Ferry and wife. Communication between the two cabins—a distance of little less than a mile—was by water, so dense being the growth on the shore that it was impossible to travel that distance by land. Shortly after this, Messrs. Hanson, Ackerson & Co. were persuaded to come to Commencement Bay and erect their mill; and, other persons coming in, the settlement began to assume an air of prosperity. Starr, Steele and McCarver laid out the original town plat, comprising about sixty acres, including Carr's five acres. Steele sold his interest to Starr and McCarver; and the General went vigorously to work to accomplish the cherished object of his endeavors,—the establishment of Tacoma City as the terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Having by this time succeeded in interesting a number of railroad men in his enterprise, he bought for the railroad company large tracts of land, and eventually gave all of his own lands in what was subsequently known as New Tacoma. After years of unceasing and almost superhuman toil and endurance, the General received the following telegram, which is still in the possession of the McCarver family:

KALAMA, July 1, 1873.

“TO GEN. M. M. MCCARVER:

“We have located the terminus on Commencement Bay.

“R. D. RICE,

“J. C. AINSWORTH, Commissioners.”

This was the first announcement of their decision, and was sent to the General as a compliment.

A great impetus was given to the growth of the town, its inhabitants increasing in number during a single month from two hundred to one thousand. The failure of Jay Cooke and the Northern Pacific Company in the fall of 1873 gave the town a blow from which it did not recover for four or five years, since which it has enjoyed a remarkable growth, having but few precedents in the United States, and none outside of it.

In 1875, while on a trip to the newly discovered coalfields of the Upper Puyallup, General McCarver contracted a cold that, after a fortnight's illness, resulted in his death on the 17th of April. His life for half a century was full of action, events and excitements, was earnest and useful, and left many a mark behind that will endure for all time to come. He was one of the men who build great cities and make states and empires.